

Karen W. Ponder
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Title: Early Childhood Consultant

Karen W. Ponder is an early childhood consultant whose work focus is assisting states in developing comprehensive early childhood systems with state and local components. She is the former President of Smart Start, which she helped to create and implemented for almost 15 years. During her presidency, Smart Start's National Technical Assistance Center was created to assist other states in developing comprehensive early childhood efforts.

Karen has been involved in all aspects of early care and education, as a teacher, preschool director, board member, teacher trainer and policy maker. Formerly she worked for the NC Division of Child Development overseeing programs for children with special needs and was also a partner in Childhood Enrichment Associates where she trained teachers throughout the southeast. She has delivered numerous seminars and workshops, has made presentations to seven state legislatures and the National Governors Association), has testified before three US Congressional Committees and the National Summit on America's Children. She was joined the Emerging Issues Scholars' Council at NC State University and is providing content for a public interactive policy space in the new James B. Hunt, Jr. Library.

Karen graduated Summa Cum Laude from North Carolina State University and completed studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. She was selected as a fellow in the inaugural class of the national Early Childhood Policy Forum. She is currently a member of the Advisory Board of the McCormick-Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership, the Frank Porter Graham Executive Leadership Board and serves on the National Advisory Panel for the FirstSchool Initiative. Karen has formerly served on the Governing Boards of the United Way of North Carolina and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

She is a recipient of the James and Carolyn Hunt Early Childhood Award for her leadership, commitment and actions on behalf of the young children of North Carolina. Governor Mike Easley conferred upon her the Order of the Longleaf Pine, the highest civilian honor in North Carolina. Upon her retirement from Smart Start, the Karen W. Ponder Leadership Award was created and will be given annually to a community early childhood leader.

Karen and her husband have two children and five grandchildren.